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Summer 7-15-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Christopher, Joe R. (1995) "C.S. Lewis' Linguistic Myth," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss1/7>

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

Formalist/New Critical analysis of C.S. Lewis's poem "The Birth of Language." Concentrates on the imagery of Mercury, particularly in relation to language. Includes brief Platonic and Christian readings of the poem.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. "The Birth of Language" (poem); Mercury (god); Mercury (planet)

# C.S. Lewis' Linguistic Myth

Joe R. Christopher

The theme of the twenty-fifth annual conference of the Mythopoeic Society was "The Language of Myth." My contribution to this topic is an analysis of C. S. Lewis' poem "The Birth of Language." It is true that Charles Huttar has written of the poem's basic imagery and theme in his discussion of Lewis' linguistic beliefs, "A Life-long Love Affair with Language: C. S. Lewis' Poetry" (89, 105, 106, 107-08). But, even if I end up in much his position, I want to approach the poem from a different direction and, when I reach it, discuss it more fully in a way reflecting my New Critical training. I believe what the poem says contrasts, to a degree, with Lewis' earlier use of the myth of Mercury, but the earlier uses prepare a reader for the later poem, for its mythic (or parabolic) statement.

I should add that my treatment does not exhaust the poem; in particular, "The Language of Myth" seems to reflect—or, at least, to parallel—some of the ideas about "original participation" in Owen Barfield's writings, especially as developed in *Saving the Appearances* (1957). Indeed, it is possible that Lewis is tracing the development of language as given in Barfield's *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (1928); I find this more succinctly summarized by Doris T. Myers than by any passage in Barfield. "[T]he three stages of language" are (1) "an initial unity in which the factual reference and the spiritual metaphor are indivisible" (Lewis' first six quatrains), (2) "a second stage of non-poetic, abstract analysis" (Lewis' eighth and ninth stanzas), and (3) "a final restoration of unity through response to poetic language" (Lewis' last two lines) (98; Barfield sums up the first two stages in his 5.1). But the topic of the influence of Barfield on Lewis, and Lewis' reaction against some of Barfield's ideas, is a difficult one that this paper does not further attempt. It would lengthen the paper greatly and does not belong to the Formalist approach adopted here.

## I. Mercury in Astrology

Let me begin, then, in 1935, when Lewis published an essay, "A Metrical Suggestion" (all rpts. as "The Alliterative Meter"). He added to that a poem, "The Planets," in which he exemplified what he had written of the alliterative verse form. He commented on the poem's topic that "the characters of the planets, as conceived by medieval astrology, seem to me to have a permanent value as spiritual symbols" (24). Here are the lines in "The Planets" about Mercury:

Next beyond her [the Moon]  
MERCURY marches; madcap rover,  
Patron of pilf'rs. Pert quicksilver  
His gaze begets, goblin mineral,  
Merry multitude of meeting selves,

Same but sundered. From the soul's darkness,  
With wreathed wand, words he marshals,  
Guides and gathers them—gay bellwether  
Of flocking fancies. His flint has struck  
The spark of speech from spirit's tinder,  
Lord of language! He leads forever  
The spangle and splendor, sport that mingles  
Sound with senses, in subtle pattern,  
Words in wedlock, and wedding also  
Of thing with thought. (Selected 24; Poems 12)

What is the permanent value of this passage as a discussion of a spiritual symbol? That is a difficult question. Perhaps one should begin by getting a few minor clarifications out of the way. First, a reader notices that Lewis is using, as is appropriate, the Ptolemaic universe. The earth is assumed to be in the center; around the earth is the sphere of the Moon; the next sphere beyond the Moon is that of Mercury.

Why is Mercury a "madcap rover"? I may be wrong, but I believe this is a combination of the speed the planet Mercury has, and the complicated diagrams the medieval experts had to make of its movements in the assumption it was circling the earth.

Why is he "Patron of pilf'ers"? This seems to be an almost purely mythological touch. In the longer *Homer Hymn* about Hermes—the Greek name for Mercury—he steals the cattle of Apollo before the end of the day on which he was born, thus gaining his reputation.

Why does his gaze beget quicksilver? I assume his "gaze" in this case refers to the astrological influence of Mercury the planet in producing mercury the mineral on earth. When C. S. Lewis discussed the planet Mercury and its influences in his book on the medieval worldview, *The Discarded Image*, he notes, simply, "Mercury produces quicksilver" (107). And he goes on with other influences, ending:

It is difficult to see the unity in all these characteristics. . . . But it is better just to take some real mercury in a saucer and play with it for a few minutes. That is what 'Mercurial' means. (108)

This is what the poem tries to capture in its description of the "goblin mineral" which divides and rejoins, with its "Merry multitude of meeting selves, / Same but sundered."

But the poem's main emphasis is on Mercury as the generator of words—nine lines are given to this out of the fourteen in the passage. The first image is of the god Mercury as a guide for the dead: here he guides words "From the soul's darkness," possibly meaning the unconscious, presumably into light, into consciousness. The second image, a pastoral one, makes Mercury into the bellwether for a flock of fancies,

of ideas or daydreams put into words it presumably means. The third image is an old-fashioned one of lighting a fire: Mercury's "flint has struck / The spark of speech." But there seems to be an error at this point in the poem, for the poem says that the spark was struck "from spirit's tinder." Actually, flint and steel are struck together to create a spark that — if things go well — sets fire to the tinder. The spark is not struck from the tinder by the flint. It is possible that Lewis meant to write *for*, not *from*, but this is not certain; it would clearly change the meaning. (Although the editions are not listed at the end of this essay, the poem as originally published in 1935 and as reprinted in *Rehabilitations* in 1939 read *from*.)

The last part of this passage shifts in its images quickly, no doubt deliberately so, in order to capture something of the nature of quicksilver. The exclamation "Lord of language!" is followed by the image of leading, as is appropriate for a lord; but this one leads "the spangle and splendor." This could be a reference to ornate clothing of nobles, but the reference is immediately followed by the apposite "sport"—the procession seems to have become some sort of game. Two lines later the image — twice — is that of marriage. I do not say these images cannot be reconciled to a degree—there are processions in marriages, at the first of some sporting events and of circuses, and of nobles on ceremonial occasions. But the effect surely is meant to be one of the shifting of images, not continuity. Underlying these shifts is the discussion of languages, of words; words are what have "The spangle and splendor," words are the sport that combines "Sound with senses," and words are what wed "thing with thought."

In Lewis' discussion of Mercury in *The Discarded Image*, he ties the astrological sign mainly to wealth and words:

[1] Dante gives [Mercury's] sphere [in *Il Paradiso*] to beneficent men of action. [2] Isidore, on the other hand, says this planet . . . is the patron of profit. . . . [3] Gower says that the man born under Mercury will be 'studious' and 'in writings curious', but yit with soundel besnesse his hert is set upon riches. . . .

[4] The Wife of Bath associates [Mercury] especially with clerks [that is, clerics—educated men]. . . . [5] In Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis* [Mercury] is the bridegroom of Philologia—who is learning or even literature rather than what we call 'philology'. [6] And I am pretty sure that 'the Words of Mercury' contrasted with 'the songs of Apollo' at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost* are 'picked', or rhetorical[,] prose. (107-08)

I am not interested yet in Lewis' attempt to find a common characteristic, but it should be noted that, of the six examples, only one associates Mercury with action, only one and a half associate him with riches, and four and a half associate him with words or learning.

This emphasis on languages prepares for Lewis' next literary use of Mercury. This is in the fifteenth chapter of *That Hideous Strength*, "The Descent of the Gods." This novel was published in Britain in 1945, ten years after the poem. As is well known, in this book and its predecessors

in the Ransom Trilogy, Lewis combines much of the medieval worldview with Copernican astronomy. Thus the planet Mercury is given an Intelligence (*The Discarded Image* 115-16), or, as the being is called in the Ransom Trilogy, an Oyarsa. In this episode, the Intelligence of Mercury descends to the earth. In this paper I am concerned only with the effect of his coming on the people in one house. First, on those in the kitchen; they are drinking tea and talking quietly.

Now of a sudden they all began talking loudly at once, each, not contentiously but delightedly, interrupting the other. A stranger coming into the kitchen would have thought they were drunk, not suddenly but gaily drunk: would have seen heads bent close together, eyes dancing, an excited wealth of gesture. What they said, none of the party could ever after remember. [One] maintained that they had been chiefly engaged in making puns. [Another] denied that he had ever, even that night, made a pun, but all agreed that they had been extraordinarily witty. If not plays upon words, yet certainly plays upon thoughts, paradoxes, fancies, anecdotes, theories laughingly advanced yet (on consideration) well worth taking seriously, had flowed from them and over them with dazzling prodigality. (380)

I have suppressed the names of two characters mentioned in the original of this passage, for I do not want to get involved in the details of the novel. But certainly the linguistic effect of Mercury on the mortals is apparent. Lewis' piling up of a series of terms — "plays on thoughts, paradoxes, fancies, anecdotes, theories"—shows the linguistic overplus which any one of the five terms would not have been able to convey. Lewis also uses his hypothetical stranger, earlier in the passage, to allow the reader to observe objectively for a moment the Mercurial change. Later than in the passage quoted here, "a gay intellectual duel" between two characters is compared, in a simile, to "birds or aeroplanes in combat"; a metaphor occurs in a reference to "sky-rockets of metaphor and allusion" (380-81). Both of these images carry the impression of height — intellectual and linguistic height — in this event.

The experience of the two mortals upstairs, where the Intelligence appears, is rather different — but related.

A rod of coloured light, whose colour no man can name or picture, darted between them: no more to see than that, but seeing was the last part of their experience. Quick agitation seized them: a kind of boiling and bubbling in mind and heart which shook their bodies also. It went to a rhythm of such fierce speed that they feared their sanity must be shaken into a thousand fragments. And then it seemed that this had actually happened. But it did not matter: for all the fragments—needle-pointed desires, brisk merriment, lynx-eyed thoughts—went rolling to and fro like glittering drops and reunited themselves. (381)

The "rod of coloured light" is presumably meant to be mysterious; perhaps it represents the caduceus that Mercury carries as a messenger of the gods. The "fierce speed" of Mercury reflects the planet's speed — thirty miles a second

— and the god's quickness as the messenger of Olympus. The image of "the fragments . . . [that] went rolling to and fro like glittering drops and reunited themselves" is not just a psychological image, but one of drops of mercury, the "Merry multitude of meeting selves, / Same but sundered," perhaps being played with in a saucer.

The description continues:

It was well that both men had some knowledge of poetry. The doubling, splitting, and recombining of thoughts which now went on in them would have been unendurable for one whom that art had not already instructed in the counterpart of the mind, the mastery of doubled and trebled vision. (381)

This passage deserves fuller study than it can receive here. Lewis seems to be claiming a certain type of psychological health as a result of studying poetry, based on the "doubled [or] trebled vision" of the poem. In what sense can poetry convey this? Perhaps Lewis is referring to the similes and metaphors in poetry as providing a separate level from the literal level of the narrative action or the other surface meaning. But that would provide only a double-leveled poem, not a triple-leveled one. Therefore, it is probable that he is thinking of symbolic or allegorical poems, in which a passage may suggest several different meanings. Traditionally, an allegorical poem is interpreted at three levels beyond the literal—the allegorical, tropological, and analogical levels. Dorothy L. Sayers, in her notes to her translations of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, has pointed out occasional passages where these three levels of meaning seem to co-inhere. Indeed, a few critics have suggested passages in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* which seem to work at four levels beyond the literal. Since Lewis enjoyed both *La Divina Commedia* and *The Faerie Queene*, this seems to be the likeliest explanation of "the mastery of doubled and trebled vision" which poetry teaches. In the novel, then, this ability of seeing more than one thing in a poem prepares one to survive a "counterpoint of the mind" in which thoughts — and presumably the words that express thoughts — are "doubling, splitting, and recombining."

The final part of this passage refers to the one of the two characters in that room who had been a philologist:

For [this character], whose study had been for many years in the realm of words, it was heavenly pleasure. He found himself sitting within the very heart of language, in the white-hot furnace of essential speech. All fact was broken, splashed into cataracts, caught, turned inside out, kneaded, slain, and reborn as meaning. For the Lord of Meaning himself, the herald, the messenger, the slayer of Argus, was with them: the angel that spins nearest the sun, Viritrilbia, whom men call Mercury and Thoth. (381-82)

Viritrilbia is Lewis' invented name for this Intelligence, but the Roman and Egyptian names of the deity identify this "angel" or angelic being clearly enough.

Some of the language of this passage is interesting, particularly where "fact . . . [is] slain, and reborn as mean-

ing." No doubt for Lewis this is one instance of the death and rebirth that is basic to understanding the universe; but also, through its metaphor, if that is what it is, it says that facts are never enough. In my non-metaphoric way, I would say that the facts have to be interpreted, to have meaning. (Sometimes more than one interpretation is possible, which confuses the issue.) However, Lewis hints at an archetypal pattern: facts, like plants in autumn, like Jesus in Christian belief, must die in order to be reborn. The resurrection bodies of plants are their springtime flowers; of facts, their meanings. (In "The Birth of Language," Lewis writes of linguistic conditions under which "Fact shrinks to truth." When this passage is discussed below, a very different interpretation of it shall be offered than has been given here—although Lewis may have meant the same thing by the two passages. Retrospectively, the reader may want to reconsider this statement about fact and meaning.)

More generally, this final passage from *That Hideous Strength* shows the effect of Mercury on a philologist. He is "within the very heart of language." The image of "the white-hot furnace of essential speech" may remind a reader that the planet Mercury is close to the Sun. (Certainly Lewis is going to develop the imagery of fire in his poem "The Birth of Language," in which the nearness of the Sun and Mercury is basic.) The series of verbs about fact — in which it is "broken," "splashed," "caught," "turned," "kneaded," "slain," and "reborn" — is another sequence deliberately made lengthy to give the effect of the overwhelming nature of Mercury's linguistic influence. The same effect is produced by the nouns which follow: "the lord," "the herald," "the messenger," "the slayer," "the angel," "Viritrilbia," "Mercury," "Thoth." It is as if one term, one title, one name, were not enough for this linguistic being. And a general consideration is also true: Lewis' artistic decision to end this description of Mercury's descent into this world with his philological effect makes the same point as does his decision to spend nine out of the fourteen Mercurial lines in "The Planets" on language: that is, for Lewis at least, Mercury is primarily a linguistic phenomenon. This also prepares for "The Birth of Language."

But, before I turn to that poem, I need to return to a question I raised earlier but did not answer. What is Mercury's "permanent value as [a] spiritual symbol"? Of course, this depends on what one means by *spiritual*. If that word is used to mean *intellectual* or is used even more generally as *psychological*, then this is a question of what *Mercurial* means as applied to human beings. If *spiritual* is taken in a supernatural sense, then the question is what aspects of God, Mercury symbolizes. Both possibilities can be answered with the same words, but the reference is far different. In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis cites the six authorities quoted above and then comments, as also has been quoted, "It is difficult to see the unity in all these characteristics." But he goes on, "Skilled eagerness or 'bright alacrity' is the best I can do" (108). Are there hu-

mans who seemed usually to be filled with "skilled eagerness," who do not — or at least do not often — lose their enthusiasm for their profession, work, or for life itself? I have known some in college teaching, both extraverts who are moved by their contact with students and introverts who are in love with the matter they teach. And I feel certain the same sort of "skilled eagerness" occurs in other professions. Next, can God be said to have "skilled eagerness" or "bright alacrity"? The skill almost goes with the definition of God, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, since He is the creator and sustainer of the universe. But I doubt that most Jews and most Christians have an image of God as eager or quick. The common image is more of pervasiveness than speed. Perhaps if God's sustaining of the universe involved His spinning each electron and carrying each graviton and photon to its destination, the "alacrity" would be part of His image. One twentieth-century attempt along these lines is Charles Williams' depiction of the Fool on his board of Tarot figures in *The Greater Trumps*. But this is not, I believe, the popular image of God.

Before I leave this discussion of the Mercurial personality, particularly as it applies to human beings, I want to add something. I say this with hesitation, for I may be wrong; and I offer it to lexicographers to accept or refute, if they find it worth noting. But I believe that the occasional description of a person as "Mercurial" in current conversation and writing does *not* mean "skilled eagerness" at all. I think *Mercurial* today means that the person is sometimes effervescent or "hyper," as we say, and sometimes depressed; the person is unpredictable. The type of personality we call Mercurial tends to be either up or down, and not in between. I think this change of meaning is due to the fact that our experience today of mercury is largely in thermometers, and most of us only look at them to check whether the column is going up or down. As I say, I may be wrong; but if I am right, this is another instance of a change in the meaning of a word that a reader of older literature must keep in mind. The god Mercury, besides being skilled, does not spend much of his time depressed.

I have treated Mercury's "permanent value as [a] spiritual symbol" in terms of Lewis' "bright alacrity," but Lewis' own examples in "The Planets" and *That Hideous Strength* allow a second suggestion: a person under the influence either of Mercury or of God-as-partially-symbolized-by-Mercury can be seen as in love with language. And this leads to the poem "The Birth of Language."

## II. Mercury in a New Myth

A shift from the Ptolemaic universe of "The Planets" to the Copernican universe of *That Hideous Strength* was noted above. Lewis in writing "The Birth of Language" — published the year after the novel — continues using the modern view of the solar system — the Copernican view — for his own purposes (*Poems* 10-11). The first quatrain reads,

How near his sire's careering fires  
Must Mercury the planet run;

What wave of heat must lave and beat  
That shining suburb of the Sun. . . .

When Lewis calls the Sun the "sire" of Mercury, he no doubt is thinking in terms of what is now an outdated theory that the planets were spun out of the Sun; but poetry does not depend on being up to date. The theory was once widely accepted, and that is enough to defend Lewis' use of it. (Perhaps it should be noted that astronomy here takes precedence over mythology: in Greek and Roman myth, Mercury was the son of Jupiter, not of Sol.)

In the first two lines, besides the paternal image, a metaphor of a race track is used. *Career* originally meant a racing course; here the Sun is the center of the track around which the planets race, and *run* is used of Mercury's movement. *Careering*, written as if it modifies the fires of the sun, technically is a transferred epithet, like Emily Dickinson's "gazing grain" in "Because I could not stop for Death." The third line, rather paradoxically, uses a water image for the Sun's fires in *wave* and *lave*. And of course an urban image appears in the use of *suburb* in the fourth line. This heavily metaphoric style is appropriate for an opening of a poem about language. It captures one type of "doubled . . . vision" that poetry offers.

Before leaving this first quatrain, one should note the verse form and rhyme scheme. The poem is in iambic tetrameter lines, and the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. What is amazing is that in the first and third lines the stressed syllables rhyme in an alternating pattern. Thus, in the first line, the rhymes are *near*, *sire's*, *-reer-*, and *fires*. Using small x's for unaccented syllables and large X's for unrhymed, stressed syllables, the pattern is this:

x A x B x A x B  
x X x X x X x C  
x D x E x D x E  
x X x X x X x C

There are, of course, some variations to this absolute pattern. For example, the third line of the ninth stanza starts with a reversal of accent (a trochee for the iamb), and the rhyme shifts with the accent: "*Lucid and small for use in all.*" Twice one of the internal rhymes picks up the first letter of the following syllable in order to make its rhyme. The third line of the seventh stanza shifts a b: "*Far, far below, the arbours glow.*" The third line of the tenth stanza shifts a t: "*Yet if true verse but lift the curse*" (the latter, Huttar 89). This cleverness in rhyme, and in making sense within the complicated rhyme pattern, is appropriate for a poem about lively language.

One other matter may be tied to this discussion of the verse form. Owen Barfield, who was sent an early version of this poem by Lewis, has written that the original poem was arranged not in tetrameters but in octameters:

How near his sire's careering fires must Mercury  
the planet run;  
What wave of heat must lave and beat that  
shining suburb of the Sun. . . .

Barfield believes that "the torrential rush of [the poem's] richness," which is "appropriate . . . to Mercury as the most mobile of the planets," is lost in the chopping of the lines in two (Huttar 108). Certainly it is true that, out of the twenty lines occupying the first and third positions in the stanzas, only five have any punctuation at their end: one parenthesis closed, one semicolon, and three commas. The general effect should be that of unstopped long lines. But Barfield is probably right that most readers will give a small pause at the end of the tetrameter lines, and thus the rhythm will not be the same. At any rate, an individual reader, knowing Barfield's caveat, can choose how to read the poem.

Overall, the relationship between the form and content has been suggested by these remarks. Thus it is appropriate to turn back to the content. The first three quatrains are one sentence, so let me quote the first stanza again:

How near his sire's careering fires  
Must Mercury the planet run;  
What wave of heat must lave and beat  
That shining suburb of the Sun  
Whose burning flings supernal things  
Like spindrift from his stormy crown;  
He throws and shakes in rosy flakes  
Intelligible virtues down,  
And landing there, the candent air  
A transformation on them brings,  
Makes each a god of speech with rod  
Enwreathed and sandals fledged with wings.

The general sense of this passage is clear: the Sun flings off fiery flakes that land on the surface of Mercury, where these flakes individually take the form of the god Mercury. This of course is a mythic statement, not a scientific one. Lewis may be using the Copernican solar system, but he is not using verifiable phenomena.

The "rosy flakes" that the Sun flings off are given two terms by Lewis: first, "supernal things," and second, "Intelligible virtues." *Supernal* has several possible meanings: "from the sky," as these beings come from the Sun; "high in rank" or "lofty," as these beings — at least by origin — are Sun born; and "divine," as they certainly are at least mythic. A reader need not decide between these meanings, for they all reinforce the importance of the "things." *Virtues* likewise has several meanings. One of them, obviously, refers to types of moral goodness; this is significant later in the poem, when these Mercuries receive their "proper names." Another use of *virtues* is as the name of an order of angels. Since the Bible sometimes refers to angels as "gods" (e.g., Psalms 8:5), there is not a necessary conflict between the image of these beings as Mercuries and this suggestion of them as angels. The angelic name also carries a suggestion of these beings' supernatural qualities. Why does Lewis use the adjective *intelligible* with the virtues? Perhaps he has in mind the philosophical meaning of that which is understandable by the intellect alone. Since angels are often understood to be beings of

pure reason, not physical, this meaning of *intelligible* would reinforce that. These "rosy flakes" that the Sun throws off are thus much like ideas or concepts. Presumably they become less purely so as they take shape on Mercury, but this is the first step in a process and the whole sequence is what is important. Besides, angels, even in the tradition of their being non-physical, can take the form of human beings or winged men without altering their nature, so the later steps are the important ones.

It should be kept in mind that the "rosy flakes" are at the literal level of Lewis' account; "supernal" and "intelligible virtues" are, at the literal level, metaphors. Of course, they are not mere metaphors. They suggest the second level of the "doubled . . . vision" of the poem.

Lewis reinforces the image of the Sun tossing off these "rosy flakes" with a sea-storm simile. The "supernal things" are flung "Like spindrift from [the Sun's] stormy crown," the crown being the top of a wave. What Lewis probably has in mind is the pictures of flames exploding off the surface of the Sun. His image of the stormy sea is a familiar one for most of his English readers and, despite the substitution of water for fire, probably an effective one. (The "crown" also carries a regal suggestion that will reinforce the interpretative readings offered later.)

Lewis says that "the candent air" of Mercury works the transformation of the Sun's offcastings into the godlike forms. *Candent* is not just a variant form of *incandescent*; instead, *candent* means "glowing with heat" or "white-hot." One remembers that the philologist in *That Hideous Strength* sat "in the white-hot furnace of essential speech" when in the presence of Mercury. And thus the bits of the Sun are turned into "god[s] of speech with" caducei and winged sandals. The caduceus is a herald's wand; the wings simply suggest the speed of the herald and Mercury's ability to fly through the air. These gods' "Enwreathed" rods mean that two snakes, as are sometimes the case with Mercury's caduceus, are wound around each in an entwined way. Lewis does nothing later with these snakes, so I suppose the detail is mentioned simply as part of the identifying description.

The next two stanzas are also one sentence:

Due west (the Sun's behest so runs)  
They seek the wood where flames are trees;  
In crimson shade their limbs are laid  
[Beside] the pure quicksilver seas,  
Where thick with notes of liquid throats  
The forest melody leaps and runs  
Till night lets robe the lightless globe  
With darkness and with distant suns.

(*Beside* is used for the *Besides* of *Poems* 10 on the basis of the correction in Huttar 108.) Again, the literal level is clear here: the Mercury-like figures journey west to a forest beside a sea, where they rest beneath trees while birds sing; then night comes, as that portion of the planet revolves away from the Sun, and the stars are seen. Mercury actually rotates on its

axis over a period of approximately fifty-nine days, so these beings may have rested beneath the trees for a goodly while — except that one doubts that Lewis was thinking about Mercurian facts when he invented this.

The detail which most needs explanation here is why these gods journey west, why the Sun commands it. Literally, it can be defended on the basis — from the action in the poem — that the godlings need a day's rest after their transformation before they fly off into space. Thus if they journey west, away from a rising sun, they will have more time beneath the trees before the night comes. The direction may also have some symbolic significance, if one ignores the turning of the planet. Traditionally, the east has stood for birth (the sunrise), the journey toward the west has stood for growing older (the day), the west itself has stood for old age and the moment of death (the sunset), and the area beyond that — on the other side of the globe, so to speak — has stood for death (night). Thus these gods of speech may have matured — or at least grown older — in their journey toward the west. Perhaps they are like Wordsworth's child who journeys west from its place of birth in the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." But I may be missing the point here, for Lewis certainly does not put much emphasis on their journey, let alone its difficulties: rather, he emphasizes their resting beneath the trees *after* the journey westward. Perhaps gods do not need to mature. Further, although it is not stated in the poem, since they had wings on their sandals, they may have flown west — which again would reduce the trip to providing simply a longer period of rest before the night comes. Perhaps they are like butterflies emerged from their chrysalides, resting (and, in the case of the butterflies, letting their wings harden) before flying through space.

So far I have discussed this journey westward and the resting beneath the trees both at the literal level and at a symbolic level about maturity. But there is another symbolic — or, more precisely, a Biblical — level to the passage. When these godlike beings come into existence — their souls, so to speak, from the Sun and their physical nature from Mercury — they go into a wooded area, an arbor, suggestive of the Garden of Eden with its trees; there they rest, as Adam and Eve had no hard labor in the Garden; later, in subsequent quatrains, they will eat of the trees — as Adam and Eve ate of one tree; thereafter they will leave the woods, as Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden; the last mention of the woods will contain fire imagery, as Adam and Eve were kept from returning to the Garden by cherubim with a flashing sword; the Mercurial figures lose much of their fiery nature in their journey outward, somewhat as Adam and Eve lost their purity before that expulsion. A displaced element from the Biblical account is Adam's naming of the beasts; here the names of the godlings themselves come from their eating of the trees.

But why, a reader may object, do the godlike beings journey westward? — after all, the Bible says that the Garden is in the east. This may be a Dantean variant: in the

*Inferno*, Ulysses tells how he and his men sailed west from Europe (out the mouth of the Mediterranean)—if strongly southwest thereafter — and nearly reached Mount Purgatory. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante discovers the Garden of Eden on top of Mount Purgatory — a place only reached by perfected souls. I do not know that Lewis had Dante in mind, but I would suggest that this Mercurial arbor seems unfallen and Lewis is writing about an inevitable leaving of the Garden. The Biblical account gives the imagery but not the meaning to this poem. Thus, the decline of the Mercuries which follows as they fly to Earth may be more Platonic than Biblical — at least, a semi-Platonic reading will be offered near the end of this paper. I am not certain to what degree these Garden of Eden parallels help the poem, in so far as it is about language; but certainly they suggest the same sensibility in Lewis that led to his writing of *Perelandra*, with its inverted retelling of the Eve and Adam story.

Whatever a reader decides about the westward journey and the resting beneath the trees, the Mercurial description is fun. Obviously the planet Mercury receives much heat from the Sun; the current belief is that, at the time a surface is facing the Sun, it has a temperature of around 800° F. Lewis invents trees of flame with "crimson shade" beneath them. "[T]he pure quicksilver seas" reflect the mineral associated by name with the planet, although in fact mercury is vaporized at 674° F., so no seas of quicksilver could actually exist on the planet. The birds are not mentioned by name, but "liquid throats" is a synecdoche for them. In an animal metaphor, their "melody leaps and runs," with a pun on the musical meaning of *run* as a rapid succession of tones. The coming of night involves personifications of night and globe: the "night lets" "the lightless globe" "robe" itself "With darkness." Actually, the planet has rotated so that the godlings are now on the dark side. Then, looking away from the Sun, they see "distant suns" — that is, the stars. Since they soon start off on a journey to the Earth, they presumably see the planets also. Because both the planets and the stars look much alike at a distance, probably Lewis' *suns* is a metonymy for both the stars and what used to be called "the wandering stars."

The next two stanzas may be considered together since they continue, to a degree, the description of the Mercurian woods.

Awake they spring and shake a wing;  
And on the trees whose trunks are flames  
They find like fruit (with wind and root  
And fronds of fire) their proper names.  
They taste. They burn with haste. They churn  
With upright plumes the sky's abyss;  
Far, far below, the arbours glow  
Where once they felt Mercurial bliss.

Beyond the content, the sentence structure may be considered. The first five quatrains were two sentences, as has been noted. But none of the last five quatrains carries over from one stanza to the next. The sixth stanza (above) is one sentence, and the seventh (also above) is three sentences.



The eighth and the ninth stanzas consist of three and two sentences respectively. What has happened is that the godlings are becoming active; and, as they do, the sentences become shorter. Thus the form and the content reflect each other in this way, as well as in the ways discussed previously.

I think the matter that bothers me the most in these two quatrains is the wings. The gods "shake a wing," and later "they churn / With upright plumes." The only wings that have been mentioned up to this point are those on the sandals. Mercury often has small wings on his traveler's hat and/or on his sandals, and occasionally on his staff; but he does not have angelic wings. Perhaps all Lewis means in these two references is the wings on the sandals, but in isolation a reader would never picture the "upright plumes" as small, sandal-borne wings. Since the passages are not in isolation, perhaps they will get by without Lewis being guilty of inconsistent imagery; but I find them bothersome. (That Lewis earlier called these gods "virtues," an angelic order, only complicates the issue—although I shall return to it near the end of this paper.)

Again, the basic action can be summarized easily. The gods get up from their rest, pick fruit (technically a simile), taste, and then fly off into space — headed, as the next quatrain will say, for Earth. I say that they pick fruit because I believe Lewis is shifting momentarily from the literal to the figurative. What he says is that these gods find on the fiery trees their names, which are on the trees "like fruit." But then he says, "They taste" these names — or is it fruit that they taste? At the literal level, I do not believe one can taste names. (I assume that *proper* in "proper names" means *appropriate*—that is, each name is suited to the individual character of its godling.)

The sentence in the sixth stanza has another problem—that is the parenthetical prepositional phrase, "with rind and root / And fronds of fire"—and it complicates what I have just written about the literal and figurative levels. This phrase immediately follows the word fruit, and certainly seems to modify it. I can think of no fruit that grows on a tree which has a hard outer coating ("rind"), that has leaves by itself ("fronds" used in a general sense), and that has a "root." Certainly leaves are the one of these three that fruit on a tree come closest to having, for often, when one picks an apple (for instance), leaves come with its stem. But, even allowing for that, this seems to be a description of a fruit growing by itself from the ground—a watermelon, for example, with its rind and its plant roots. In this case, since the fruit cannot be growing on a tree, then the literal sense, despite what was said above, must be that the gods found, picked, and ate their names: "They find . . . their proper names" "on the trees," their names being "like fruit" that grows "with rind and root / And fronds"; "They taste." This makes grammatical sense but not as much common sense. Further, possibly Lewis is thinking of word roots, in a pun, as he writes of these fruits that are names. (This passage is like some of the tangles of levels of meaning in Piers Plowman.)

Fire imagery runs throughout this passage. The trees have "trunks of flame"; the gods, having eaten their fruitlike names, "burn with haste"; as they fly off into space, they leave behind the "glow[ing]" arbors. If one wants to argue that these imitation Mercuries are angel-like because of their bothersome wings, then perhaps they are seraphim ("the burning ones")—not virtues after all—because of their association with fire.

Lewis likes fire imagery, of course, for its suggestiveness of different sorts — one thinks of the sun's fire-berries brought to renew a star in chapter fourteen of *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* and the brief vision of Bism, a land far below the surface of a world, in chapter fourteen of *The Silver Chair*. In "The Birth of Language," the association of the Sun and the planet Mercury has set up these fiery fancies. Since flames can stand for the spiritual, such as with the tongues of flames that appeared above the Apostles' heads on the day of Pentecost, all of this fiery imagery is appropriate for a poem about language being given by God, as will become clearer below.

One final comment on the seventh stanza. When the gods "churn / With upright plumes the sky's abyss," there is a scientific problem. Obviously in the vacuum between planets, there is nothing for those plumes to work against. If Mercury has an atmosphere—I believe the current scientific view is that it has a thin one of hydrogen and helium from the solar wind—then the gods had better get a good start with their wings, for they are going to drift with inertia the rest of the way. I am being too literalistic, of course. The wings on Mercury's sandals are symbolic of his speed; as a god, he does not need them to fly. But Lewis' "churn[ing] / With upright plumes" suggests he imagined these gods flying through some non-existent medieval aether.

The next two quatrains — whose number of sentences have already been given — may be considered next, along with the first two lines of the last quatrain:

They [the gods] ache and freeze through vacant seas

Of night. Their nimbleness and youth

Turns [sic] lean and froze; their meaning more,

Their being less. Fact shrinks to truth.

They reach this Earth. There each has birth

Miraculous, a word made breath,

Lucid and small for use in all

Man's daily needs; but dry like death.

So dim below these symbols show,

Bony and abstract everyone.

At this point, the poem tends to turn to the secondary level that I have been downplaying. At the literal level, the gods journey through cold space to Earth; somehow, upon reaching Earth, they turn into words, into speech. Since they had Mercury's form, and since we have already seen in "The Planets" and *That Hideous Strength* that Lewis emphasizes the linguistic aspects of Mercury, this is appropriate — if somehow surprising. In "The Planets" and *That Hideous Strength*, Mercury was the inspirer of speech,

the controller and stimulator of words; but he did not turn into words.

Perhaps the difference between this poem and the first two works lies in the closeness of the focus, to use a photographic metaphor. In "The Planets" the poem discusses Mercury close up. It tells what he does, but it does not trace any journey from Mercury to Earth. In *That Hideous Strength*, Mercury as an Intelligence of a planet descends on Earth; but it is Mercury himself who descends, and his influence is shown close up. Again, the effect is immediate. But in "The Birth of Language," Mercury the planet keeps its astronomical distance from Earth: what travels to Earth is not the god, or the Intelligence, himself, but only his likenesses. They are journeying away from "the white-hot furnace" of language to a colder world, and they journey through cold space to that goal. Thus, by the end of the poem, or as near the end as we have reached, Mercury is far away; it is a distant focus. (In an unusual word choice, Lewis writes of the likenesses having their birth "there" on Earth, instead of *here*; even when the godlings reach Earth, in other words, a distancing is retained in the process.)

Let me suggest in a different way what this poem is about. It is generally known that, in the old astrology, the planets "rained" their influences down upon the Earth. Of course, that was an easy image when the Earth was thought to be the center of the universe and the planets were up above, circling in the sky above the Earth. Just as rain fell from the sky upon the Earth, so could less material aspects of the heavens. What Lewis has essentially done, despite his use of the Copernican solar system and the modern cold space, is write a poem about the astrological influence of Mercury upon Earth. Mercury, as planet and god, sends his linguistic influence into the world.

Lewis did not have to suggest that this influence diminished as it came to the Earth. He could have written a poem in which Mercury (or Mercury's influence) came to Earth much as he did in *That Hideous Strength*. But, instead, the godlings' "nimbleness and youth / Turns lean and froze." Their "being" diminishes. When they become words, the words are "dry like death." Charles Huttar calls this a "Platonic notion" (105). One remembers, for example, that in the dialogues of Plato's middle period he referred to the Good, the True, the Beautiful as concepts ("Platonic Ideas," in popular parlance) that existed as facts in the supernatural realm, where the souls beheld them; however, when the souls drank of the River of Forgetfulness and were born into this world, they had to gradually recover these concepts from the partial aspects of them found here.

By extension, one may say that pure language (in some sense) exists on Mercury, that the Idea of language is there; but on earth, "Fact shrinks to truth." Here *fact* refers to the Idea; *truth* refers, rather oddly, to the use of language to recover, as well as we can, the Idea. But it is not actually what I have called the Idea of language. We remember that the gods found their "proper names" on the trees. I suspect

the names they found were words like Truth, Goodness, Beauty; perhaps also Honor, Loyalty, Love, Purity, Friendship, Service, Sanctification — and many more. It is these things that are facts on Mercury, like fruits; they become truths, to be sought after, on Earth. So also in the poem, when the gods' "meaning [becomes] more, / Their being less," it is the factual existence, the being of these Ideas, that vanishes between the spiritual realm and here; the "meaning [becomes] more" in this world because it is meaning that is expressed by words, a meaning that no longer can be directly tasted, can no longer be experienced in its complete factuality, here.

The words are "dry like death," "Bony and abstract," because they are not like fruits to the mouth. We talk about moral concepts but we do not, fully, experience them. The ideas expressed by these words are "Lucid and small" because we are not overwhelmed with their full glory, with their rich tang and taste (to use the fruit image again). These ideas are necessary in civilized life — "for use in all / Man's daily needs," says the poem — because civilization cannot continue to exist without them; civilization is based on virtuous exchanges between its citizens; but these ideas are not fully recaptured here. ("Man's daily needs" may be an echo of The Lord's Prayer, "our daily bread" — shifting from the metonymy to what it means — and, if so, this religious allusion supports the suggestion that these words — the godlings' names — are positive in nature.)

Another reason I have suggested only positive qualities for the Ideas tasted on Mercury is that I do not see that Lewis suggests, with his fruit image, any negatives. No doubt fruit can become rotten or some pieces of fruit can be unripe and give stomachaches — that is, Ideas like Hatred, Torture, and Rejection exist—but Lewis does not mention bad fruit, his picture of the Mercurial landscape



is positive, and he no doubt would argue that all evil is perversion of good, that such evil has no independent existence, and that his depiction of the spiritual realm as Mercury does not include such evil. A reader of course may argue with Lewis' assumptions — Dualists would, for example — but simply as an interpretation of the poem this seems satisfactory: the names that the gods get on Mercury would seem to be positive ones.

Let me expand on this slightly. I can picture one of my fellow Christians attempting to read this poem and saying that, given Christian theology, Lewis *must* have meant for *some* of these godlings to have been fallen. That is, they were all created perfect — as “virtues”—but both the Garden of Eden imagery and the Christian tradition of Satan's fall before the creation of mankind imply that *some* of these angel-like creatures would have fallen before they left Mercury. All I can reply is that the imagery of the poem does not support this reading. No negatives are connected to the Garden, and *all* of the godlings are said to dwindle in the journey to Earth. I will offer a Christian reading at the end of this paper, along with a Platonic reading, but I do not believe this particular approach — the one that I have outlined here — works in terms of the poem. A reader must start with what the poem says, not with what theology seems to say the poem should say.

Before I go through the poem at a Platonic level of interpretation, let us consider the final quatrain:

So dim below these symbols show,  
Bony and abstract every one.  
Yet if true verse but lift the curse,  
They feel in dreams their native Sun.

The quatrain, perhaps because it is the final one, emphasizes the verse form: two sentences, each one two lines long; two commas, each one coming at the middle of a sentence — that is, commas at the end of the first and third lines. (Two of the three commas in these positions appear in this last quatrain.) The first line can be misinterpreted as a sentence fragment if an unwary reader takes the *so* in “so dim” as a beginning of a *so-that* construction. Instead, *so* possibly is an intensifier: “these symbols show” very “dim[ly]” on earth (“below”). But the intensifier *so* is rather colloquial for Lewis' use. Probably he is using it as a conjunctive adverb: *consequently* (or *thus*) “these symbols show” “dim[ly]” on Earth.

The content is interesting both before (in the first two lines) and after (in the last two) the reversal. (The “fulcrum point,” in John Ciardi's critical terminology, may be used instead of *reversal*.) The words of the previous quatrain are called *symbols*, presumably because they stand for ideas (or Ideas) but they do not convey the experience by themselves: that is, the word *love* stands for the concept of human or divine love, but it does not convey the experience or practice of love by itself. Thus Lewis, in a metaphor, calls these words “bony” because they can give the skeleton of the idea, so to speak, but not the flesh and

blood, not the living experience. Lewis, in his other writings, likes to make a distinction that he finds in French between two types of knowledge: that by the intellect and that by experience — to know about and to know by participation (e.g., *The Four Loves* 143, *An Experiment in Criticism* 139). This seems to be much the distinction he is making here between the concepts as expressed in words on Earth and the concepts as tasted like fruit on Mercury.

Then the last two lines offer a partial reversal. Huttar asks and answers, “Can language ever be redeemed from its fall, enabled to recollect its original glory? Only partially, as if ‘in dreams’ . . . , and then only by poetry, ‘true verse’” (106). Wordsworth exclaims in another Platonic, or semi-Platonic, poem:

O joy! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature still remembers  
What was so fugitive!

Wordsworth celebrates the memories of a youthful joy, based on a closeness at birth to God, that cannot be recaptured in later life except through memory. Lewis celebrates a type of divine origin of ideas that cannot be recaptured, cannot be experienced, in this life except through great poetry. Perhaps Lewis is suggesting that poetry, with its tendency toward concrete imagery, and not philosophic argument, is the best way to recall the Ideas experienced elsewhere; argument would seem to be a “knowing about” the Ideas, while poetry could provide (at its best) a re-experiencing, a “knowing by participation,” of the taste of the fruit.

At this point I would like to conclude by restating the meaning of this poem. First, the literal meaning. The Sun tosses out fiery flakes which reach the planet Mercury. There they take on shapes like that of the god Mercury; they rest for a while, then rouse and eat some fruitlike parts of fiery trees, and next fly through space from Mercury to Earth. Here they are changed from god-like beings into words spoken by mankind. Occasionally the words are shaped into sun-like splendor in great poems.

Second, the Platonic meaning. The origin of the eternal values is the Godhead, the One, symbolized by the Sun, from which they come into this universe. In this universe, they are reshaped into apprehensible being by a Demiurge, symbolized by Mercury, which gives them the names, the terms, by which these values are to be known. By these names, these words, they are used by mankind — indeed, from these words develop whole languages, with words for all purposes. Occasionally, in the Platonic dialogues perhaps, or the *Rig Veda* or the *Analects*, something of the original values is recaptured.

Third, since Lewis was a Christian, as well as something of a Platonist, let me try a Christian meaning. I also offer this because Lewis spoke of the “doubled or trebled vision” of poetry in *That Hideous Strength*; this reading is the third “vision” of this poem. God the Father, God the Son,

symbolized by the Sun at the center of the solar system, is the source of all virtues, which He sends like angels to God the Son, the Logos or Word, symbolized by the planet Mercury. God the Word names these virtues and sends them, again like angels, to be born into this world of mankind. At a distance, this coming to Earth echoes the coming of Christ, for each word has "birth / Miraculous." Another hint of their divine origin is that each becomes "a word made breath," with its echo of the Biblical "The Word was made flesh" of John 114 (Jerusalem trans.). Further, *breath*, *wind*, and *spirit* are the same word in Hebrew (*ru'ah*), Greek (*pneuma[os]*), and Latin (*spiritus*). Occasionally, the divine origin of the words is recaptured, most clearly in works like the *Bible* and the *Divine Comedy*.

Now then, am I saying that these latter two meanings were planned by Lewis? Certainly there are details in the poem that supports them. Perhaps he planned them; and, if so, he was writing a lyric intended to work at several levels, like *Piers Plowman* or *The Faerie Queene* at their greater lengths. Also if so, "The Birth of Language" is an allegory. But I called it a myth in my title. Lewis writes in a letter:

My view w[oul]d be that a good myth (i.e.,) a story out of which ever varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages) is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put.) (Letters 458)

Is "The Birth of Language" a mythic poem or an allegorical one, in Lewis' terms? Certainly I do not intend that either the Platonic meaning or the Christian meaning cancels out the other. Two meanings would suggest the poem is mythic — n Lewis' terms of "one meaning" for allegory. But allegories sometimes allow different levels of interpretation, as has been said, so the two readings do not *prove* in non-Lewisian terms the poem is mythic. Let me suggest an answer in a different way. There are some details of the poem that do not have much significance for me — the journey westward is the obvious example. Although I discussed it at the point of textual consideration, it does not figure in my retellings of the poem as Platonic and Christian parables. Perhaps that and other details will become of vital significance to another reader at another time — as Lewis puts it, to a "different reader . . . in [a] different age." Thus, whatever Lewis may have intended, however much he may have meant to control his meaning or meanings, I suggest the poem may have a mythic quality. It hints at a larger meaning than is easily put in words, my words at least — for words, after all, are "dry like death."

#### Acknowledgements

I want to thank Mrs. Marjorie Mead, Associate Curator of the Marion E. Wade Center, for checking a reading in the 1935 version of "The Planets," and Charles A. Huttar, Professor of English at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, for reading the first draft of this paper and adding comments beyond what he had said in his paper and several question marks — which caused me to rethink what I said. Probably he will still find things to disagree with, but the paper is better than it otherwise would have been. A few of my points — particularly my opening suggestions about Owen

Barfield's influence — are in response to comments or questions offered by members of the audience of my reading of the latter part of this paper at the conference of the Mythopoeic Society in Washington, D.C., on 6 August 1994.

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